



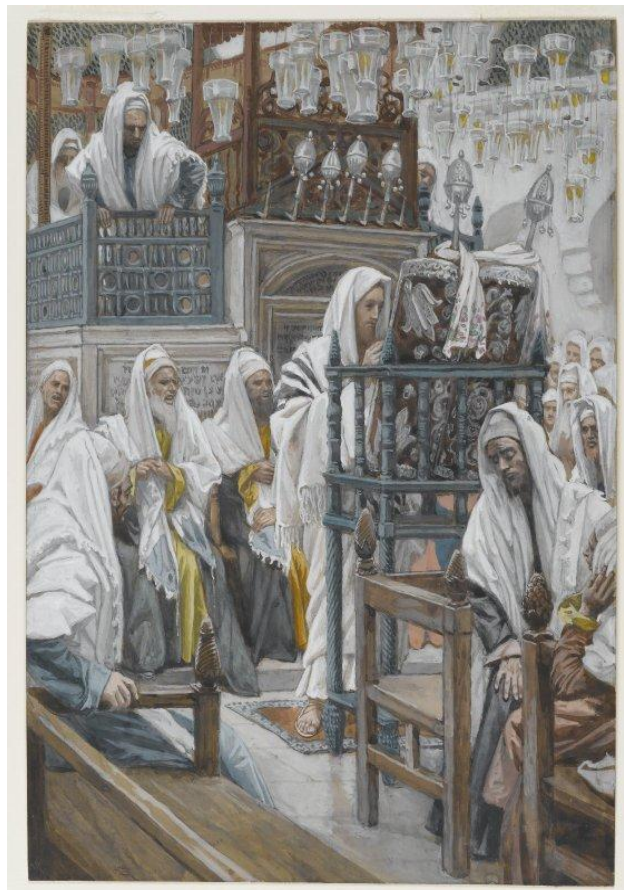
# Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on  
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

Breaking Open the Word

by Mary Birmingham

## Breaking Open the Word Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time C



Jesus Unrolls the Book in the Synagogue, James Tissot 1836–1902



## Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2.

God of My Life

Only in love can I find you, my God.

In love the gates of my soul spring open,  
allowing me to breathe a new air of freedom  
and forget my own petty self.

In love my whole being streams forth  
out of the rigid confines of narrowness and anxious self-assertion,  
which makes me a prisoner of my own poverty and emptiness.  
In love all the powers of my soul flow out toward you,  
wanting never more to return,  
but to lose themselves completely in you,  
since by your love you are the inmost center of my heart,  
closer to me than I am to myself.

But when I love you,  
when I manage to break out of the narrow circle of self  
and leave behind the restless agony of unanswered questions,  
when my blinded eyes no longer look merely from afar  
and from the outside upon your unapproachable brightness,  
and much more when you yourself,  
O Incomprehensible One,  
have become through love the inmost center of my life,  
then I can bury myself entirely in you, O mysterious God,  
and with myself all my questions.

-- Karl Rahner, SJ

Catholic  
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& Creed**  
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## LITURGICAL CONTEXT

- ▶ Today is the Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time.
- ▶ It is winter ordinary time.
- ▶ We hear of the early days of Jesus' ministry.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, then surface insights in the wider group. (@Five to seven minutes)

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one or both of the readings. (You may want to concentrate on the Gospel alone.)

## First reading: Jeremiah 1, 4-5. 17-19

- ▶ Jeremiah served as prophet at the end of King Josiah's reign and into the reign of the ruthless King Jehoiakim.
- ▶ Jeremiah prophesied during a difficult time in Israel's history.
- ▶ The people were not interested in Jeremiah's prophetic message.
- ▶ He was nevertheless passionate about the word God emblazoned on his heart. He grieved over his beloved Israel. He was known as the "weeping prophet".
- ▶ When Josiah was king there was a flicker of hope that things would return to the splendor of the Davidic monarchy.
- ▶ A nationalistic fervor dominated. People were swept up by the false prophets who promised prosperity and a return to the past glory of Israel.
- ▶ They were in no mood to hear Jeremiah's reality gospel.
- ▶ Jeremiah did not prophesy in Josiah's reign, but began full force in the dreadful reign of Jehoiakim. He could no longer be silent. He simply had to speak God's word to the people.
- ▶ Today's reading speaks of the call of the prophet—Jeremiah's call and commission into prophetic ministry. Jeremiah lays out his credentials and by whose authority he speaks so passionately.
- ▶ It was none other than God himself who formed Jeremiah in his mother's womb. It was none other than God himself that compelled Jeremiah to speak his word.
- ▶ God is intimately aware of the heart and soul of every person. God prepared Jeremiah and consecrated him for this holy purpose from the very beginning of his existence.
- ▶ Jeremiah had a crucial role in God's unfolding plan of salvation.
- ▶ The reason this reading was chosen is for its connection to the Gospel. Jesus was also called before he was born in the virgin's womb to be the Messiah and Savior of the world. Jesus was called to reconcile the world to God.
- ▶ Jeremiah saw beyond his immediate situation; he had a keen sense of the God of history. Jeremiah's ministry extended to the entire world.
- ▶ In today's reading Jeremiah is warned that the people will reject his message.
- ▶ Jeremiah is a type for the future Christ. He prefigures the rejection Christ would

experience by his peers, his family, friends, Jewish leaders and all those who were closed to his message of reconciliation and redemption.

- ▶ Jeremiah paid the ultimate price for his prophetic ministry and obedience to God's will.
- ▶ Suffering is the lot of all prophets and Jeremiah freely shared his suffering with those to whom he prophesied.
- ▶ He prepared the people for the trials to come.
- ▶ He chastised them for the way in which they had become lackadaisical in their response to the covenant God forged with them.



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, then surface brief insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What is the customary response when a person or persons stand above the crowd and speaks for truth and righteousness? What usually happens? What is the response of the crowd? Why do you suppose they respond as they do? What does it say to us about human nature?
- ▶ What was Jeremiah up against in his prophetic ministry to the people?
- ▶ How is this reading a challenge for our contemporary society?
- ▶ Who are the prophets of today? What is our response to them?
- ▶ Have you ever been called to be a prophetic voice in your own world? In what way did you respond (or not) to the call?
- ▶ What usually happens to prophets? Who are some modern day prophets in our world who challenged us to find our better selves?
- ▶ If we did have prophets as they did in the Old Testament what would they be preaching to us right now?
- ▶ How could this possibly be a word for us today?

### Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 12, 31-13, 13

- ▶ Once again the gnostic members of Paul's community rear their ugly agendas and cause division in the community.
- ▶ The gnostics believed they possessed special knowledge that set them apart from others in the community. They considered themselves to be the elite of the community.
- ▶ Since they and they alone possessed special knowledge and were living in the *Last Days*, they should be exempt from having to do the everyday mundane activities such as growing and preparing food—things necessary for sustaining life.
- ▶ They and they alone had a special channel to God. They and they alone had

special gifts of the Spirit that others in the community did not possess.

- ▶ Their arrogant over-the-top display of the gifts prompted Paul to chastise them. He wrote to them and reminded them that if indeed they felt the need to self-righteously boast, they should boast instead in the Lord Jesus.
- ▶ He reminded them that the gifts were not for their own personal glory. The gifts were for the purpose of uplifting the community.
- ▶ The most important gift of all is love, Paul asserted. If love is not present, the other gifts are meaningless.
- ▶ As far as Paul is concerned there is no greater gift than love.
- ▶ Paul insisted that to be a member of the Christian community was to bind oneself to the community. Each member of the community should be committed to offer self-sacrificing love for other members. The community was of paramount importance, the individual was secondary, thus making the thrust of Paul's exhortation primarily ecclesial.
- ▶ Paul presented a catechism for all generations on what true ecclesiology (a theology of what it means to be church) is all about.
- ▶ This reading is probably chosen more than any other reading for nuptial ceremonies and the connection is clear.
- ▶ However, Paul's intention was never to provide a standard wedding Scripture to be used at all Christian marriages until the Lord's return. His intention was to teach, challenge and present a new way of living and being in community—a theology of community--what it means to be in loving, covenant relationship with the People of God. He set himself up as an example of the love we are called to give. He gives a blueprint for what it the Christian community calls for and expects.



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, surface brief insights in wider group. The catechist responds first with insights from his or her own life. See example, APPENDIX #2.

- ▶ Have you ever known anyone who lorded their religious gifts over your head or made you feel that their spirituality was far superior to yours? They perhaps might say, "If only you would turn your life over to God the way I have, everything in your life would be better!" While there is no doubt truth in the statement that turning over one's life to God is a wonderful thing, what is the underlying message being conveyed in the statement?
- ▶ While it is possible that the aforementioned person is simply enthusiastic and not self-righteous (it is good to give the benefit of the doubt) what would be a better way to reach out to the intended person without conveying self-righteousness? What would



you say?

- ▶ What is your experience of ecclesiology/church? What does it mean to you? Why is ecclesiology an important theology in our Church?
- ▶ What evidence is there in your life that you live the mandate of Paul's letter? What evidence is there of the love Paul talks about?

## Gospel: Luke 4, 21-30

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

### Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
  - ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?
- 
- ▶ Today's Gospel story continues the scene from last week. Jesus stands in the synagogue before his neighbors and friends—those who knew him as he was growing up.
  - ▶ He reads a passage from Isaiah that heralds the future Messiah. All eyes are on him.
  - ▶ He then proceeds to tell his neighbors and friends that he is none other than that long awaited Messiah, the one Isaiah was foretelling.
  - ▶ Imagine you are there. The tension in the room is palpable. Eyes move slowly from person to person. The question, "Just who does he think he is?" is unspoken, yet runs through the minds of many onlookers.
  - ▶ They must choose; and so must we.
  - ▶ Their initial positive reaction quickly turns to hostility.
  - ▶ The people of Nazareth had heard rumors of his miracles. People everywhere but his home town praised his mighty deeds. Now the townsfolk could see with their own eyes. Were the rumors true?
  - ▶ There is an immediate line drawn in the sand between "*people everywhere*" and Jesus' own friends and neighbors.
  - ▶ Jesus' disciples knew the right answer. Jesus was the Son of God, not the son of Joseph. Jesus was indeed the Messiah and Savior of the World.
  - ▶ Jesus' neighbors wanted to see the miracles they had heard about firsthand. They did not care by whose authority he accomplished them—they simply wanted to see them and benefit from them.
  - ▶ They had great expectations. Jesus could put this little nothing hamlet on the map. He could set up his healing and exorcism ministry in Nazareth.
  - ▶ The people tested him; Jesus refused to fall for their ploy. They were livid when Jesus' plans did not fit what they had in mind.
  - ▶ Jesus told them that his ministry would not be centered in Nazareth. It would be taken to the whole world--to the gentiles—just as Elisha and Elijah's ministry extended not to the Israelites but to foreigners—to gentiles.
  - ▶ Jesus reminded them that prophets are never accepted in their hometown.

- ▶ He used the example of Elijah and Elisha to illustrate his assertions. The people were angry over his comparisons. Foreboding thoughts were brewing in their minds, “Just who does he think he is?”
- ▶ The point of Jesus’ teaching is similar to the point he made before—those who should have gotten his message and his identity missed it—the Israelites. Those who would not be expected to receive it got it and embraced it—the Gentiles.
- ▶ The religious power brokers should have seen and understood the action of God. They were too self-righteous and arrogant to relinquish control and believe what God was really doing.
- ▶ The bottom line? If everyone was as equal in God’s kingdom as Jesus insisted, what would that do to their elevated status?
- ▶ Those who had no vested interest in such things were able to open their minds and hearts to what God was doing.
- ▶ In this vignette Jesus sets forth the mission of the kingdom and the mission of his fledgling church. Two themes dominated Jesus’ intent in this pericope—liberation and universality/inclusion. Jesus embraced Isaiah’s ministry of liberation—both Jews and Gentiles would inherit the kingdom he came to establish.
- ▶ The new “elite” in Jesus’ kingdom would be the poor, the disenfranchised, the oppressed and the outcast--those who had no advocates, no voice and few options for a better life.
- ▶ Jesus presented himself first to Israel—the *chosen ones*—the people who should have jumped for joy at the privilege of being participants in the drama unfolding before them on salvation history’s stage. But they rejected him and those who would follow in his footsteps.
- ▶ God commissioned Jesus to take his message of universal salvation to the entire world—to Jews and Gentiles. It was God’s will.
- ▶ The gospel today points to a huge difference between the faith of the Israelites and the faith of the Gentiles.
- ▶ Jesus would be rejected just like Jeremiah was rejected.
- ▶ Today’s Gospel account presents us with an amazing paradox. Jesus offered a message acceptable to the Lord, yet he himself was not acceptable to the people.
- ▶ Jesus made it clear that his authority came from God—the power to inaugurate his messianic mission was empowered by the Holy Spirit.
- ▶ The kingdom Jesus came to inaugurate will liberate its subjects.
- ▶ No one will be left outside looking in.
- ▶ All will be healed, delivered, preached to and taught.
- ▶ All people of all races, all classes, all economic and status distinctions will be welcomed in that kingdom.
- ▶ Jesus wanted his disciples to know with certainty that God’s *Word* would go forth regardless of the persecution or oppression that would be endured in the effort. For this they would be strengthened; for this they should stand firm. It is God’s will.



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix #3 for an example.

- ▶ What is the primary message of this Gospel?
- ▶ Imagine you were a hometown person from Nazareth and your neighbor Jesus got up at Mass one Sunday to make the bold proclamation that Jesus made. How would you respond? Put yourself in their shoes. What would you do to discern whether his message were fact or fiction?
- ▶ Why was it so difficult for the Israelites to accept the mission to the Gentiles? Can you make any modern day corollary? What are the implications for us today?
- ▶ What does this gospel teach us about human nature?
- ▶ What does it teach us about self-righteousness?
- ▶ What does it teach us about how God relates to us?
- ▶ How do you feel about Jesus' insistence that all are welcomed? Do you welcome everyone—even the outcasts of our day?
- ▶ Have you ever been rejected or persecuted for standing up for what is right?
- ▶ How do you think Jesus or any prophet must have felt when his own family, friends and neighbors rejected him and tried to throw him off a cliff? What is the message for us?
- ▶ What is the challenge of this gospel for Christian discipleship?
- ▶ Do you think you have the strength to be a prophet? What evidence is there in your life that you are willing and ready to embrace persecution and opposition for the sake of the gospel?

Catechist shares first, and then invites participants to respond. (See appendix #3 or example)

Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question (@ three minutes)

- ▶ What one thing are you willing to do this week to be a better disciple/prophet in your world? Is there something that needs to change in your life?

### Concluding Prayer

Option 1. Celebrate a minor rite—an exorcism or blessing for catechumens: RCIA 90-97

Option 2. Pray the Prayer of Pope Clement

Option 3. Other suitable, but brief prayer. (Perhaps pray the Prayer of St. Francis.)



## Appendix

#1. Liturgical ministry is prophetic ministry. Liturgy calls us, strengthens us and empowers us to become the person God created us to be. Liturgy challenges us when we go astray. The prayers, Scriptures, preaching and example of the gathered community remind us that we are responsible for our brothers and sisters. Liturgy says in prose, poetry and song what it is sometimes difficult to say out loud. I once chose a song for liturgy that challenged people to live the social Gospel. The text was written in the voice of a child from the Third World. The song simply was a request for the rest of the world to “see” the situation of those in other parts of the world who have no hope and no opportunities for a productive life. The song was a simple request for help.

Every time I sing the song in my community I get responses from the community thanking me for raising consciousness. However, every time I sing it I think of a letter I received many years ago from a man who told me that I had no business asking the community to listen to such songs. He said they were not uplifting. He reminded me that he came to church to feel happy, not sad. “When we sing such songs,” he lamented, it makes me very uncomfortable. I did not come to Mass to be uncomfortable.” As I read his letter I called to mind the wonderful truism. *Jesus came to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.*

Such is our prophetic role in the world today. Had the song I mentioned been sung in this man’s presence, there would have been no end to his dismay. I immediately thought of him and people like him who never want to hear a challenging word and resist all efforts to embrace, absorb and be challenged by a Gospel that provides it. Jeremiah experienced great suffering—all prophets do! “Lord, give us the strength to remain steadfast! “

2. My experience of ecclesiology/church is profound. The Church has been sacrament to me and my family. The Church has been the hands and the feet of Christ in my life. The community has been our anchor throughout every ordeal of our lives—to pick us up—to challenge us—to nurture us—to console us. I feel sorry for people who do not have a Church family to call their own.

Such nurturing and consolation extends beyond our own parish boundaries. When 9/11 occurred and we drove to New York to get our daughter we knew there would be few places to park our car and navigate the city. I called a person I knew in a Newark parish. The parish offered free, safe parking for our entire stay. They reached out to us, made us feel comfortable in our sojourn and helped us make our way around uncharted waters. The Christian community is not an exclusive club in a specific locale. We are not bound by geography, race, ethnicity or any other divide. We are bound together in love by our life in Christ.

3. Doing the right thing, living the prophetic life and living according to the Gospel does not always lead us to garlands and bouquets of thanks. Living the prophetic mandate of our baptism is not always the easy thing to do. We are met with resistance even in our

parish communities. Many years ago my husband and I reached out to a homeless man and helped him. A man in the parish whose ministry it was to help the poor heard that we had helped the man and was furious with us for helping him. He told us that the man was a drunk and giving him food did nothing but enable him to continue to drink. “And besides,” he told us, “it is not your job to help the man, it is ours.”

I indignantly told him that if God wanted me to help one of his children, I did not need permission from a committee to tell me it was OK. We can argue whether or not giving him food enabled his drinking, but my husband and I believed our job was to offer the man some human companionship and something to eat on the eve of Thanksgiving. Today’s Gospel challenges me to go out in the world and establish the kingdom Jesus came to inaugurate. That means that whenever his Body is hurting I need to be ready to offer healing balm. I am called to heal, preach and liberate God’s people. How do I accomplish that? Every time God places a broken or wounded human being in my path and I extend human compassion and hospitality I am fulfilling my God-given covenant. (Remember, Jesus has no hands or feet now but ours!)



## Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's  
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

*Salvation*  
*Creed*  
*Miracles*  
*Kingdom of God*  
*Catholic Social Teaching*

*Morality*  
*Moral Decision Making*  
*Jesus Christ*  
*Sacraments*  
*Eucharist Series*

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

### **SALVATION**

Jesus tells his audience in the synagogue that the Messiah they had been waiting for had finally arrived and that he was that Messiah. He was there to usher in the salvation God had promised. Jesus Christ, Savior of the World. We get a glimpse of the early days of his mission in today's Gospel. Sadly the Messiah they were looking for is not the Messiah they received. Many missed what God was doing right under their noses. We are saved by the power of his sacrifice. Jesus continues to save us. Today's session will address the Church's teaching on SALVATION.

### **KINGDOM OF GOD**

Today's liturgy reminds us that Jesus came to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy that God would establish his kingdom on earth and that the Messiah would be sent to bring salvation. It is thus appropriate that we focus our attention today on the KINGDOM OF GOD.

### **CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING**

Paul's catechism on love and Jesus reminder that the kingdom of God had arrived is an excellent opportunity to focus our attention on what the Church means when it tells us that we are to live according to the norms set forth by Christ in the gospel. In Jesus' kingdom all are welcome. All people possess dignity as children of God. All people are entitled to Christian charity. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention today on CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING.

### **MIRACLES**

The people of Nazareth cared little about where Jesus received his authority. They only wanted to be amazed and benefit from the miracles they had heard about. The Church is very definite in its teaching about miracles—how we should approach them and what

they mean to us. It is thus fitting that today we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about MIRACLES.

## CREED

Today's liturgy affirms our belief in Jesus, the Messiah. He came to bring salvation to the world. He came to bring God's word to the world. He came to teach us the truths of the universe. He began by teaching in the synagogue. The Church teaches us the foundational truths of Christianity—the Christianity he died to establish. Christ's salvific resurrection from the dead, and our own overall belief in the afterlife. Such beliefs are foundational Christian truths and as such are proclaimed in the Creed we profess every Sunday in the Eucharistic Liturgy. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about the CREED.

## MORALITY

As we focus our attention on the Jesus' announcement that the Messiah had indeed arrived and as we listen to Paul instruct his community on what it means to love in the Christian, communal sense, it is fitting that we focus our attention on what it means to live the moral life. We love as Jesus taught us to live when we sincerely strive to live moral lives. It is thus appropriate that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about MORALITY.

## MORAL DECISION MAKING

As we focus our attention on the Jesus' announcement that the Messiah had indeed arrived and as we listen to Paul instruct his community on what it means to love in the Christian, communal sense, it is fitting that we focus our attention on what it means to live the moral life. We love as Jesus taught us to live when we sincerely strive to live moral lives. We live moral lives when we make right choices--when we choose to love. It is thus appropriate that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about MORAL DECISION MAKING.

## JESUS CHRIST

Jesus is the long awaited messiah—the messiah of the new kingdom he came to establish—not a political kingdom rooted in power, possessions and prestige, but one rooted in life with God. It is thus appropriate that we focus our attention on that Messiah who promises eternal life and died for us to ensure it. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention on JESUS CHRIST.

## SACRAMENTS

Jesus tells the people that he is their long awaited Messiah. He came to work his miraculous deeds and to illustrate that God was with the people. His desire to be with us continues in the sacraments of the Church. Christ's ministry is remembered and his presence is made manifest in the various sacraments. It is thus appropriate that today we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about SACRAMENTS.

### **EUCCHARIST SERIES:**

Our premier celebration of the Paschal Mystery—the life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension sending of the Spirit is made manifest and re-presented for us in the Eucharistic liturgy. This week we continue the series on the Mass that we began last week. Today we will focus on part \_\_\_\_ of the Eucharistic Series.